

Christmas Greens

A Christmas Story
By Martha McCulloch-Williams

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"Christmas without greens? Impossible! There surely must be some of a sort in this big farming world," Leona said almost tragically.

Her cousin and host, Amos Baker, shook his head.

"None nearer than Sinking Fork," he said. "That's twelve miles off and the chances against finding anything even there—the hills are so low and the valley hardly worth the name."

"You must take me to the head waters. I know I shall find what I want there," Leona said impetuously. "Get out the wagonette at once! No matter if Christmas is ten days off, I know a way to keep greens fresh."

"Won't you say please?" Amos asked banteringly as he went toward the door. Leona ran after him with the prettiest face of contrition.

"Of course I will and 'thanky, sir,' and anything else in the world you ask," she said, laying her hand on his arm.

He smiled at her. "Suppose I should ask you to say 'Yes' to Norrie Cordon. I've a great mind to do it. If Norrie is my brother-in-law, he's worth a dozen of that other fellow."

"Hm. You are sure there is another fellow?" Leona queried saucily, but with a pretty flush.

Amos looked supernaturally wise. "There must be," he said. "Candy three times a week and flowers and gineracks till the carrier wishes rural free delivery had never been thought of—those are signs I've never yet known to fail."

"You should not peek. It's ungentlemanly, even in your private mail box," Leona said severely, pursing her lips.

Amos shook his head at her. "You shouldn't flirt," he said, "but today I'm bound to give you a chance. Norrie will go with you on this fern chase, because I'm bound to go somewhere else."

"How nice! Norrie is never saucy," Leona said, with a dimpling smile. It made her so enchanting that Norrie, just then coming through the door, lost his heart over again for at least the twentieth time. The losing gave him a fearful joy. He too, had read and interpreted the signs of the post, but as he climbed into the wagonette and sent the horses away at a slapping pace he put all thought of this unknown rival from him, resolved to enjoy at least one blissful day basking in the sunshine of Leona's smiles.

Presently the way heat at almost a right angle. Norrie reined in there and said, letting his free hand rest over Leona's clasped ones: "The fork is just ahead, but you'll find nothing there. I know. I hung around it every fall. I wonder if you dare go down in the hills with me? There you can get loads of things—green cedar, cross vine, ferns and big green briars with leaves like wax. I know of a holly bush, too, and a clump of pines."

"Why aren't you taking me to them?" Leona interrupted, her eyes dancing.

Norrie smiled back at her, but there was an anxious undertone in his voice as he answered, "Because they're a long way off, not too far for the horses, but so far we'd be in the night getting home."

"As if that mattered," Leona said scornfully, "when you know my heart is set on giving those dear babies such a Christmas as they never saw. Your sister Amy says I may do just what I please. I please to have a Christmas tree, with the whole house trimmed to match. Drive on—like the wind. Sancho and Sally will have a long rest while you're helping me back and heel."

"Just as you say, ma'am," Norrie answered suspiciously meek. "But if I haul the tree home, to say nothing of cutting it down, I'm to have my choice of whatever is on it or under it. Is that a bargain?"

"It has to be, but I never thought you'd be such an extortioner," Leona said loftily, although her eyes twinkled. Then she felt silent, drinking in the joy of the sunshine, of the rapid whirl through the soft December day.

The landscape grew more barren, more broken; the fields were smaller, the farmhouses meaner and less thrifty. By and by the road ran down a steep ridge, only to climb an opposite one steeper still. The sun had begun to sink. Norrie looked up at it apprehensively, then sent the blacks faster. A mile farther on he stopped and sprang out, saying as he lifted Leona to her feet, "You'll want your supper before you get it, I reckon, but here we are."

Leona cried out in raptures. Before her stood a clump of pines. On beyond down the rocky slope lay matted armfuls of long, lacy fronds. The green briars also were in evidence. She caught up Amos' pruning shears and began to cut things right and left. She was so intent that she did not see Norrie slip away. In very shortly she looked up to see him dragging in a fine young holly full of scarlet berries. "The kids never saw anything like it," he said as he hoisted it into the wagonette and made it fast there. Then he fell to work, wrenching up ferns in armfuls and tearing down mats of briar. Leona looked at him with something of awe. He was so slight and light on his feet, she had never credited him with the strength and show of manhood. Intensely she contrasted him with the other fellow, the city fellow, who could and would give her millions—millions which had almost

tempted her to accept the man, albeit she knew she did not love him truly. If she had asked him to set his hand to hard things for her pleasure she could fancy his look of amazed disgust.

Still she could not whistle him down the wind. She was proud, ambitious, luxury loving, not the least bit suited to be a farmer's wife. And Norrie Cordon loved his land and his vocation too well ever to be anything but a farmer. With a sigh, she told herself she should no doubt end by taking Ennis Loring. Suppose he should accept her casual invitation and come down to Longly, the Baker place, for the holidays? How bare and cramped the life would appear to him—a life wherein the circus made the event of the year and going to church of Sundays was as much a diversion as a duty.

Something of all that floated nebulously through Leona's mind as she watched Norrie at his joyous obedience.

"The best branches are over on that far side," he said, flinging off his coat and scuffling out of his shoes. "We'll take just half a dozen. The tree won't miss 'em. I'd hate to leave it ragged. Somehow this clump seems to belong to me. I found it first when I was little more than a boy."

Almost before she knew it he stood among the branches breaking and cutting slender stems. Leona ran to pick them up as they fell. "Stand back!" he called to her, at the same time reaching for an especially tempting bough. The wood of it was tough. It bent where he thought to break it, and, instead of snapping, it crushed in to stringy fibers. Norrie had the impulse of mastery even over inanimate things. Forgetful that he was twenty-five feet in air, he gave the bough a jerk so energetic it made him lose his balance and come crashing earthward. But there were boughs lower down, and somehow he clutched one with his right arm, swung himself up to it and clambered back to the trunk. Coming down this, Leona saw him hitch himself along in a way wholly unlike his ascent. She did not know the reason until he stood by the wagonette, saying almost apologetically: "I reckon you'd better drive on the way home. My left arm hit that big limb when I fell and put itself out of business."

Longly farm at Christmastide made the neighbors stare. Amy had insisted upon a party. It would never, never do to waste all Leona had brought to pass simply upon the family. Greens were everywhere—over doors and windows, in nooks and corners and up and down the broad stairway. The tree, too, was a vision with tapers gleaming through its boughs and all manner of tinsel ornaments sparkling amid its green leafage. The tinsel had come from the city. So had the other fellow.

Leona had been panic stricken at the outset. Now a sunny peace possessed her spirit. Since she had seen Norrie toppling against the evening sky—falling, it might be, to his death for his lady's whim—she had begun to question her own heart more closely than ever before. What answer had rewarded the questionings she did not tell. But Ennis Loring had found her more softly, more subtly fascinating than ever and was ready for her sake to keep terms with all the rural world. It amused him, of course, that the tree bore such wondrous fruitage. Trees were not Christmas commonplace roundabout. Longly, so all the people thereabout had sent their gifts to be piled at the tree's foot and thence distributed. After they were distributed there would be supper, then the dance. Norrie would have to be a looker on. His broken arm was not yet out of the sling.

Amos ought to have been Santa Claus, but had flatly refused. So Leona herself, made up into a startling Christmas fairy, with a black half mask and a pair of realistic wings, apportioned properly the Christmas tree's fruit, saying things that fitted most cases beautifully and so doubled the value of the presents. Nobody had been forgotten. Ennis Loring stood hugging a huge tin horn. Norrie's sound arm was fairly heaped with bulging parcels, topped with a toy automobile. Then the fairy lifted from the litter of moss and greenery at the tree's foot a huge pair of spectacles and clapped them upon her own eyes. "I am looking for—the person I belong to," she said clearly. Everybody held breath as she walked up to her two lovers, who by some chance stood side by side. For a breath she studied their faces intently, a beautiful flush showing below her half mask; then, with a little laughing cry she laid her hand upon Norrie's, saying very low, "This is what you get for finding me these Christmas greens."

Good Story, Bad Copy.
The impression that only about 10 per cent of the manuscripts submitted to publishers ever see the light of print is, according to observations made by a former newspaper man and now manager for a big publishing house, erroneous. "There is a demand for good stories among publishers in New York that is hardly met by the product," says the manager. "Any manuscript, decently written and with any merit whatever, is bound to receive careful consideration. More than that, I have in mind a case in which the first consideration was not met, and yet the story was accepted and published. A California woman sent to a large house a 20,000 word story written on what appeared to be discarded curl papers. Yet so conscientious was the reader that he waded through a great part of it under protest, and, behold, he found a gem! A poorly written story, no matter how good the plot or interesting the theme, has little show, but writers should not be discouraged by reports of harsh or indifferent treatment at the hands of publishers."

Pittsburgh Dispatch.

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Wonders of Baalbec.

Baalbec, or Baalbek, is the name given to a ruined city lying in ancient Coele-Syria, forty-five miles northwest of Damascus. There is nothing particularly remarkable about a ruined city being found in the locality mentioned, but the size of the blocks of stone used by the ancient builders of this particular city is something that has puzzled the modern engineers since the day when Baalbec was first made the Mecca of the oriental traveler. There are immense stones on every side of the visitor to this ancient pile of ruins, but the three most remarkable blocks—said to be the largest ever used in the construction of a building—are in a wall back of the temple of Baal. These immense stones are respectively sixty-four, sixty-three and sixty-two feet in length and each is thirteen feet in thickness, but the most wonderful thing in connection with them is the fact that they are at a place in the wall twenty-five feet from the ground. How these immense blocks of granite were ever raised to such height is a question that has never yet been answered.

Silenced Him.

A Kansas City woman tells this story on her husband to demonstrate the inferiority of the masculine mind. One morning as her husband was sitting down to the breakfast table he glanced down to the clock and said, "We must be later than usual this morning." "Don't place too much confidence in that clock. It stopped at 5 o'clock this morning, and I just set it going by guess," replied the good wife.

"Were you up at 5 o'clock?" asked the husband.

"Of course not." "What time did you say the clock stopped?"

"At 5."

"If you weren't up at 5," replied the man, with a puzzled look, "how in thunder do you know when the clock stopped?"

"Why, dear, it stayed stopped," was the reply. The man did not say another word that morning.—Kansas City Times.

Dangers of Cocaine.
Cocaine, an alkaloid of cocoa leaves, was discovered in 1859, but remained in comparative obscurity until 1884. In minute doses, whether taken internally or used as a spray on mucous surfaces, its effect is wonderfully exhilarating, producing for a time the fresh and buoyant sensations of youth and perfect health, that have apparently no unpleasant reaction, and therein lies the explanation of the subtle and irresistible power it quickly acquires over its victims, carrying them to the very brink of destruction before they have dreamed of danger. Being a cumulative poison, the first warning symptom does not appear until the fatal chains are riveted that shall drag them, horror stricken and powerless of resistance, over the precipice to complete mental, moral and physical ruin.

Foreign Flags in America.

The first flag to float over American soil was the royal standard of Isabella, emblazoned with the arms of Castile and Leon. A white flag with a green cross was its companion. Some years after Columbus landed at San Salvador the Cabots planted the banner of England and of St. Mark of Venice on the eastern shore of North America. In the centuries that have intervened since a variety of national flags have waved where now only the stars and stripes is the accepted emblem. Over Texas have floated the French, Spanish, English, American and Confederate; in Louisiana the flags of France, the Spanish flag, the tricolor, the American and Confederate flags; in California the Spanish, Mexican, Russian and American.

The Coconut.

The coconut tree is the most useful of all plants in the tropical region. Its seed furnishes food and an intoxicating drink. The shell gives drinking cups and vessels and a hard material capable of a high polish, from which personal ornaments may be manufactured. The trunk furnishes wood for dwellings and boats. The leaves make clothing, cordage and ropes. The fibers of the bark and of the nut afford matting and carpets. The buds furnish a succulent vegetable, and from the trunk a palatable liquor is drawn by making an incision.

Are Good as Married.

First Sailor—No, Bill, you don't really know what life is till you get spliced. Second Sailor—Wy, shiver my timbers, messmate! I've never been married, true, but I've had yell'er fever and cholera, I've been frostbit, drowned, burned alive, eat by a shark, blown up at sea and operated on for cancer. What more does a reasonable chap want?—London Answers.

The Real Thing.

Express Clerk—Value of this package, please? Fair Damsel—\$25.00. Express Clerk—Lith? Fair Damsel—You heard what I said. Those are love letters from old Bagsoocoyne, and I'm sending 'em to my lawyer.—Cleveland Leader.

Translating the Definition.

Johnny—Papa, what does precious mean? Papa—It means—it is a term applied to children who know more than is usual for their age. Johnny—Oh, yes; it means a fresh kid.

Slow.

He—Darlin', I have loved you ever since first met. She—Well, why didn't you say so long ago? Did you think I was a mind reader?

A man should be upright, not be kept upright. Marcus Aurelius.

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